

Fact Sheet on Societal Trauma

Trauma Definition: Any experience that leaves a person feeling helpless, fearing for their life/survival, their safety. However, it's important to remember it is a person's perception, their experience, that makes something traumatic.

Racial/Societal Trauma: Racism is an assault on one's sense of safety and the right to exist in the world (an assault on our ability to meet our universal needs as human beings).

Traumatic Impact of Racism on People of Color:

- Stressors resulting in serious physical health problems in targeted people, including both physiological health (cardiovascular, renal, lower life expectancy, cancer; and psychological health (increased risk of depression, anxiety, substance disorders,
- Increased level/frequency of anger, fear, distrust, exhaustion, paranoia



Responses to Stress:

Fight: to actively oppose source(s) of racial stressors.

- Pros:
 - o Productive release of negative energy
 - o Healthy response to life challenge
 - o Positive impact on self esteem
- Cons:
 - o Potential for adverse and sharp reaction from environment (i.e., police aggression); work problems; labeled as “trouble maker”
 - o Danger to physical safety leading to above-mentioned stressors

Flight: to flee from source(s) of racial stressor through denial of impacts of racism and even denial of racism’s existence

- Pros:
 - o Able to suppress/repress stressors caused by racism
 - o Can avoid immediate negative response or potential worsening of situation
- Cons:
 - o Guilt and shame
 - o Sense of inadequacy, self-betrayal
 - o Failure as a human being

Freeze: A state of shutdown and disconnect while waiting for the threat to pass

- Pros:
 - o Allows person to “get through” threat situation
- Cons:
 - o Loss of sense of self
 - o Diminished control over environment
 - o Feeling of helplessness

Effect of Chronic Stress of Racism:

- Triggers body’s stress response
- Must “Gird” oneself (constantly on guard)
- Must work hard to manage anger, fear, distrust
- Generalized anger: distrust of individuals and institutions in position
- Helplessness/powerlessness (“It’s too big”)
- Not speaking up is followed by feeling of self-betrayal and resentment
- Denial, minimization, and rationalization (de-sensitization) of racism
 - o “I must take care of the dominant group.”
 - o “Why are we still talking about race?”
 - o Seeing acts of racism as isolated and accidental because of feeling overwhelmed at the “hugeness” and systemic nature of racism

Impact on white people:

- Generalized anxiety/fear when in groups of people of color; this fear and anxiety is suppressed and denied because “I’m not racist.”
- Unmet needs for compassion/altruism to include “out-groups” results in stunted, yet not readily recognized growth as human being.
- Continued support of misguided and ineffective explanation and “solution” of social issues leads to no solutions, more intense response to failure of society to address racism honestly and directly. All lead to increased anger and frustration in whites
- Guilt and shame is experienced by white people who recognize hurtful acts and do not speak out. High level of rationalization/intellectualization occurs to keep self-concept positive
- White people’s biggest fears: Being considered racist; acknowledging that status quo is actually not fair; that we may have to actually change if racism exists
- Fear of expulsion from social group if one expressed more awareness of pernicious effects of racism

What do people of color fear?

- Being the object of racism
- Afraid that the status quo is inevitable

What do white people fear?

- That things really aren’t fair and they might lose their advantage/privileges
- Being called a “racist”

Racial Microaggressions: The accepted definitions of microaggressions “are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.” (Sue et al. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271-286.)

People who exhibit a microaggression are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities.

Trauma Echoes: Even with excellent therapy for families experiencing abuse/neglect, it may take several generations for family members to break free from strong behavior patterns. Same with racism and we know that there has been no “therapy” for the past 5-10 generations. The effects of oppression and degradation can reverberate forward into our children.

Implicit Bias: These are the pervasive attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Implicit biases are not readily accessible through introspection in contrast to explicit biases that are held on a conscious level. They can activate without intention. (from *Implicit Bias Review* by Cheryl Staats. 2013. The Ohio State University: Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.